DREAMS, VISIONS AND GOD'S NEW WORLD

October 1, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Joel 2:23-29
Luke 24:28-35

"Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." -Joel 2:28b(RSV)

Lewis Thomas, physician, philosopher, former President of Sloane Kettering Cancer Center is, I believe, somewhat of a prophet for our times. He has written mostly about life, its complexity, its wonderful surprises, its mystery. In his last book he turned his attention to the possibilities for life in the future. The title essay in that book is Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony. That symphony, by the way, is powerful, deep; it reflects Mahler's struggle with the puzzle of human mortality. Here is the way Lewis Thomas concludes that essay:

"The man on television, Sunday midday, middle-aged and solid, nice looking chap, all the facts at his fingertips, more dependable looking than most high-school principals, is talking about Civil Defense, his responsibility in Washington. It can make an enormous difference, he is saying. Instead of the outright death of eighty million American citizens in twenty minutes, he says, we can, by careful planning and practice, get that number down to only forty million, maybe even twenty. The thing to do, he says, is to evacuate the cities quickly and have everyone get under shelter in the countryside." I recall reading that in the paper and wondering if the man had ever tried to get out of downtown Chicago after 3:30 p.m. on a normal weekday afternoon. "That way we can recover, and meanwhile we will have retaliated, incinerating all of Soviet society, he says... What about radioactive fallout? he is asked. Well, he says, anyway, he says, if the Russians know they can only destroy forty million of us instead of eighty million, this will deter them. Eighty million would be another matter..."

And then Lewis Thomas becomes reflective:

"If I were sixteen or seventeen years old and had to listen to that, or read things like that, I would want to give up listening and reading. I would begin thinking up new kinds of sounds, different from any music heard before, and I would be twisting and turning to rid myself of human language." [p. 167, 168]

Some time in the past decade a profound change occurred near the heart of this culture. This change of heart was not primarily in the way we voted, or the way we spent money, our sexual habits, reading preferences... This change of heart was about the way people view the future, the human prospect, if you prefer a little more flamboyant language. In the past, the sociologists tell us, people viewed the future in a way that can be characterized as hopeful.

Some time in the past decade that changed apparently. The change showed up first, as most major changes do, in the sub-culture of youth, when high school students shocked us by declaring that a majority of them expected to die in a nuclear war. Not long after they shocked us again by revealing that a majority expect that their lives will not be as happy, healthy nor generally as good and fulfilling as their parents' lives were, even if they survive the nuclear war they expect to happen.

The change of heart promptly began to trickle up - which is the way cultural change happens. At about the same time high school statistics were revealing the pessimism, college students - who for generations have been characterized as mainly utopian about the human prospect, and who for all those generations generally could be counted on to be impatient advocates and consistent irritants for a better world - suddenly became very practical. Suddenly the college departments of Economics, Business and Accounting had more students than they wanted or needed. That is not a negative assessment of those majors, just an observation that there has been a significant change in what students want from an education. Traditional Liberal Arts majors declined: the pragmatic, economically practical majors mushroomed. Asked about their hopes and dreams, they talked about five year career goals and tax shelters instead of world peace.

Concurrently, on a broad national base, the last vestiges of the "war on poverty" were abandoned. We surrendered. And after several decades of difficult but steady progress toward a racially inclusive society, the Civil Rights Movement came to an end. We even began to think that it was wrong to dream the dream: that somehow harm was done by even suggesting that we could, if we wanted to, create a new and better world for our children and grandchildren. As we enter the last three months of the decade of the 1980s we seem to be a culture without much of a dream, without a vision of what could be: a pragmatic, practical culture, obsessed with economic bottom lines and uninterested in flights of fancy and imagination about a world that might be, but is not yet.

Several thousand years ago an obscure Hebrew prophet addressed himself to a very dismal set of historical circumstances. The prophet Joel lived during a tragic time - a time of famine, a time of no food and no prospect of food. When the crops fail in 500 B.C. you are in a lot of trouble. People got hungry and sick and the elderly were dying of malnutrition; the babies were not doing well and the wise men and women thought about the possibility that it might be the end. History, as far as they were concerned, might stop with their generation as they all slowly died of starvation and passed out of existence. It was then and there, in the midst of that grim and hopeless situation that God raises up a prophet, who if he never said another word, said these words memorably:

"And it shall come to pass... I will pour out my spirit on all flesh...your sons and daughters will prophesy...your old people shall dream dreams...your young people shall see visions."

"Where there is no vision, the people perish" is the way the old proverb puts it. There is something about the human enterprise that needs a vision, a dream. We are in trouble when we have no dreams.

That dynamic, that special responsibility of dreaming and visioning, is what religion is for. In large measure it is what the Bible is about. God's people are the custodians of a dream. No matter how grim the immediate prospects appear, people in the Bible keep the faith, have hope in the future. Biblical people in every age, says William Sloan Coffin, have a "passion for the possible."

It is what sustains them through years of Egyptian slavery and decades of wandering through the wilderness. It sustains them during decades of exile and literally centuries of war, oppression and persecution. It sustains the early Christian Church, growing precariously in the nooks and crannies of the Roman Empire. It sustains little colonies of Christians even on the days their leaders are arrested, tortured and executed. It sustains African slaves in the New World who adopt the religion of their captors and masters and who find in that religion the power to keep faith with the future. It sustains prisoners in death camps who somehow articulate the vision that God's new world is coming. And, on a very personal level, this vision, this ultimate confidence in God, gives strength and hope to countless millions of men and women who face their own futures, their trials, their illnesses, even their own death with grace and courage.

It may be the crisis of our time that the dream, in theological language, the vision of a world as God intended it, a world of peace and justice and kindness, has faded.

Walter Bruggemann, one of our best and brightest Biblical scholars, wrote recently:

"After so much guilt and denial, we do not believe in an alternative future. We do not believe in a God who makes things new, who cares so much about truth, equity and righteousness that the present must give way to the force of God's promises... We cannot imagine a different future for the world, nor for those closest, most precious around us. The only available alternative thus is to live as fully and as self-centeredly as is required of us. We end in despair. We can see no more of a transformed world than we can of a transformed marriage, or a transformed self, or a transformed job." [Israel's Praise, p. 135]

Bruggeman helps us understand that without a vision, people really do perish; that there is a connection between a fading of hope and an increase in teenage suicide; that there is a connection between the poverty of dreams and the massive turning to the anesthesia of cocaine and crack, or the culturally acceptable anesthetic of narcissism.

We Christians really do believe that things can be different. We really do believe that peace is possible: that the whole creation can live in mutuality and cooperation. We Christians have the special responsibility of reminding the world that there are alternatives, that we were created for something more than Mutually Assured Destruction: that it is not utopian to expect human beings to live up to the image of God which is in each one of us.

It is the special vocation of Christian people to keep the dream alive, and sometimes that means to keep alive the necessary vulnerability and capacity for anger and outrage when the dream is denied and defiled. It is our special task never to accommodate to the demonic forces of poverty and racism. It is our task to keep this society from ignoring Cabrini-Green or the homeless men and women walking our streets or the children caught in the hellish web of drugs and crime.

It is our responsibility to think anew and to push and prod the world to think anew.

On this day particularly, World Communion Sunday, it is our vocation to dream the dream and to celebrate the vision of a world at peace. At the table of our Lord we taste the newness of God's reconciliation. At table, like those disciples who first broke bread and shared the cup with the Risen Christ, our hearts burn within us with the possibility.

What a vision it is!... a world where human beings are brothers and sisters: a society which cares for even the least of its citizens, a church which celebrates the individuality of each of its members. It is a precious vision. To our friend Paul Winter, it looks like the American President and the Soviet Premier floating down the Colorado River, through the Grand Canyon, in a river raft.

To the prophets it looks like a great banquet, with good food and wine, with God wiping away all tears. [Isaiah 25]

And to Christian people the dream is, has been and is of each of us and all of us, around a table, sharing the life of our Lord... Catholic, Protestant, Black, White, North American, South American, European, African.

Is it utopian? Is there any possibility that this vision will ever actually happen? Or does common sense dictate putting it aside and living in the real world? Our faith is that the vision does become reality, not so much in one dramatic event as it does in one act at a time, one gesture of kindness, one brave affirmation, or one angry refusal to accommodate to the forces of death. The dream lives in the lives of individual people, who have found in Jesus Christ reason never to give up hope.

We dare to hold on to our dream because we know a secret. We know about Jesus Christ, victim of the world's harshness and cruelty and cynicism, who did not remain victim, but conquered death. The vision is real because in him, death no longer has dominion in the world, or in our lives.

The vision of God's new world begins here - on World Communion Sunday - around this table as we are served bread and wine and as we serve bread and wine to one another. What is boldly true is also true in our particularity. Each of us has a dream. Each of us dreams about a better world. Each of us knows where life is broken and needs healing and new power. The body and blood of Jesus Christ, poured out for us, is the source of our hope. There is a dangerous myth that mature people put dreams aside and live on the basis of lowered, more realistic expectations. That's dangerous. We need old and young to dream. You don't have to live without the dream. Your relationships - your future - can be different.

So let us come, custodians of a vision of a new world and a hopeful future. Let us come to table with brothers and sisters we have never seen, but who are also at table at this hour on every continent, in every land.

Let us come with people we will never see, but whose grandchildren will share with our grandchildren whatever future we make.

So then let us respond to that gracious invitation of our Lord: let us attend the feast prepared for us. Let us keep the faith and nurture the vision and dream the dream.